DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 197 CS 210 402

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TITLE The Uses of Literacy Theory: The Great Leap and the Rhetoric of Retreat.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Communication (Thought Transfer); Educational History; Epistemology; *Literacy; *Oral Language; Psycholinguistics; *Rhetoric; Writing (Composition); *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Great Leap Theory (Literacy)

ABSTRACT

During the late 1970s, English studies journals began to include various versions of, and proposals built upon, the Great Leap theory of literacy. Advocates of this theory claimed that literacy itself actually caused a "great leap" in human cognition and that the language of literate persons was essentially different from the language of oral people: oral people used coordination, which revealed their additive, holistic ways of thinking, whereas literate persons used subordination, an indicator of their analytic thought processes. Different theorists subscribed to different versions of the Great Leap theory, among them Walter Ong--one of the chief names associated with it--who assumed (1) that literacy-orality differences lay both in the physical world (i.e., sight and sound) and in the innate universal capacities and limits of the human mind; (2) that language was a transparent medium through which, if read properly, one could apprehend actual human thought processes; and (3) that both language and other human productions could be neutral. This perspective on literacy and the world view it embodied, reflected, and taught might have been part of the general retreat of American society from political and social questions raised during the 1960s. (AEW)

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CCCC
March, 1987
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The Uses of Literacy Theory:

The Great Leap and the Rhetoric of Retreat

Jim Berlin's forthcoming Rhetoric and Reality makes a convincing case for the multiplicity of rhetorics during a given sociopolitical era and for their reflection of competing world views. In other words, various "rhetorics" (the ways we talk about and teach written composition) embody different epistemologies (assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the kind of rules governing the discovery, or invention, and communication of the known). In addition, Berlin shows that "the college writing course...responds quickly to changes in American society as a whole, with literacy as defined by the college curriculum at any moment serving as the intermediary between the two--between the writing course and larger social developments" (6 in ms.).

If, as Berlin says, the Academy's notions of literacy mediate between the writing course, that is a rhetoric, and larger social developments, then it is, I believe, important for us to examine the way particular conceptions of literacy interpret the world. With Berlin's thesis in mind, I have become interested in the fact that during the late 70's both composition and other English studies journals began to include various versions of, and proposals built upon, the Great Leap theory of literacy. Specifically, I have begun

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to wonder what there is about this notion of literacy that accounts for the attraction it apparently holds for some in our profession. Let me explain briefly my terminology and then give a partial list of articles based on this view.

The chief names associated with what I call the Great Leap theory of literacy are Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, and Walter Ong. Their perspective claims that literacy itself actually causes a "Great Leap" in human cognition. It also claims that the language of literate persons is essentially different from the language of oral people. Literacy--both its thought and language--is described as "subordinate," "analytic," "exploratory," " objective," "distanced," and "abstract," while orality--both its thought and language--is said to be "additive," "aggregative," "redundant," "empathetic," "participatory," and "situational" (Ong, O & L 37-50). Thus, oral people use co-ordination, which reveals their additive, holistic ways of thinking, whereas literate persons use subordination, which reveals their analytic ways of thinking.

During the last decade some have found the oral side of the Great Leap theory's dichotomy useful in describing the thought patterns and the language, particularly the written language, of freshman English students in American colleges and universities. One of the earliest articles to use the Great Leap to explain student writing was Thomas J. Farrell's "Literacy, the Basics, and All That Jazz" (1977). The most widely reprinted is an essay by Ong himself, a paper called "Literacy and Orality in Our Times" (1977). This piece first appeared in the ADE Bulletin in 1977, but since then has been reprinted in MLA's Profession 79, in Journal of

Communication , in Tate and Corbett's The Writing Teachers' Sourcebook , and finally in Winifred Horner's Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap.

Richard Lanham at one time--though he seems since to have recanted--suggested that universities ought to build the lower-division curriculum on "the split between oral and literate cultures that Eric Havelock and Walter Ong have so brilliantly explicated" ("Gyroscope" 14). At the MLA forum on literacy in 1984, Donald Lazerre used the Great Leap theory--and no other theoretical perspective on literacy--to call for radical restructuring of English departments. Probably the most well-known proposal built on the Ong-Havelock theory of literacy and orality is Farrell's 1983 3C's article "IQ and Standard English." This controversial paper, you may remember, stirred all sorts of angry reactions, including the charge of racism (Greenberg in Greenberg et al. 460).

Discussion in the journals and in this conference (Greenberg et al.; Sledd; Hartwell) has, for the most part, discredited Farrell's pedagogical suggestions. But it seems to me that we should look carefully at theories on which specific proposals are based. This means examining the assumptions out of which the theories evolve and which, as Lakatos has made clear, they often protect. I focus on Ong's version of the Great Leap theory because his articulation is the one most accessible to English studies; it is through Ong, I believe, that this theory came into composition and rhetoric scholarship. In the next few minutes, I'd like to discuss a few of the assumptions which appear to underlie Ong's comprehensive statement on literacy, his 1982 book Orality and

Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. I'll conclude by asking some questions about the relationship among these assumptions (that is, the epistemology), recent composition theory (the rhetoric), and larger social developments.

The most significant and widely held assumption of the Great Leap theory of literacy and orality appears to be the dichotomy itself. Ethnographic studies of language and literacy seem to indicate that the differences between the languages of orality and literacy are not nearly so neat as Ong, Havelock, and Goody claim. Other studies suggest that the cognitive differences may not be so different, either. I refer you to work by, particularly, Heath, Scribner and Cole, and Basso, summarized cleverly in Daniell, forthcoming. But all Great Leap proponents accept this basic assumption--that orality and literacy are essentially, fundamentally different.

Ong's version includes other assumptions. Ong attributes the differences between orality and literacy to two basic causes, both assumed to be accurate, both unquestioned. I'll let Ong explain the first: "Sight isolates, sound incorporates," he says. "Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer....By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart....The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together" (O & L 72). According to Ong, then, the oral mind, focusing on auditory sensations, perceives--indeed seeks out--the whole, the aggregate. The literate mind with sight as its chief sensation tends, on the

other hand, to analyze the whole, to discover the discrete parts of the whole, to look for relationships among them (diss 74).

Ong offers no evidence from the neurological sciences to support these assertions. Nor does he employ cross-cultural psychological research to lend credence to his implication that these ways of perceiving are universal, and not merely thought patterns taught by Western schooling. In addition, it is interesting that Soviet psycholinguist Lev Vygotsky claims just the opposite. According to Vygotsky, "visual perception is integral" and "speech requires sequential processing" (33). In contradiction to Ong's notions, Vygotsky concludes that "speech is essentially analytical" (33). But for Ong, the differences between literate thinking and language, on the one hand, and oral thinking and language, on the other, are rooted in physical and physiological phenomena. In other words, Ong assumes that at essence these two different modes of thought and language are beyond human agency and social influence--they are situated both "out there" and in the universal nature of the human mind.

The other cause of orality-literarcy differences, apparently accepted by all Great Leap theorists and explained in more detail in Havelock than in Ong, is the assumption that the human mind, especially its memory capacity, has some upper boundary. Thus, most of the "mental energy" of persons in oral cultures is "used up" in trying to preserve received knowledge. Such "oral" persons have little "mental energy" left over for more advanced kinds of thinking. That is why in order to preserve meaning, oral cultures rely on a variety of mnemonic devices ranging from the most

elemental sound patterns of the surface language to larger organizations of discourse.

The notion that the human mind has limits on its capacities carries with it the implicit assumption, prevalent in the West since at least the 18th century, that both the physical and mental abilities of human beings are analogous to those of machines. Of course this metaphor has made possible many technological advances, but sometimes I wonder whether the comparison has lost its heuristic value and has become Truth with a capital T. Of course cognitive psychology has demonstrated apparent limits on short-term memory, and research based on this premise has yielded valuable insights into the processes involved literacy. Yet it is also true that over-emphasis on short-term memory constraints has contributed as well to shallow, sometimes misleading conclusions about the nature of reading and writing. A case in point is E.D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, a work whose fallacies have been pointed out by George Dillon in Constructing Texts. As for long term memory, research has apparently reached no conclusions about its limits. Psychotherapy continues to be amazed at how far reaching the human memory appears to be. And no research, to my knowledge, has come close to positing an upper boundary on the abilities of human beings to learn from others and to apply this learning to new problems presented by their environments.

A third assumption that seems to govern Orality and Literacy is to be found in Ong's conflation of language and thought. Despite brilliant research in this century, we really don't know much about the relationship of language and thinking. Yet Ong appears to

assume that language is a clear window on human thought processes. On page one Ong announces the subject of his book--"first, thought and its verbal expression in oral culture... and, second, literate thought and expression in terms of their emergence from and relation to orality". Throughout Orality and Literacy, Ong continues to use these two terms, expression and thought, together. It is not the fact that Ong assumes that thought can be inferred from language that I am concerned with; without this assumption, what we call human life would be impossible, let alone academic work. It is, rather, the tenacity with which Ong holds this assumption and his applications of it that need to be demonstrated and questioned.

For example, Ong uses this assumption to assert that even connecting words like "and" and "while" show whether the writer thinks aggregatively or analytically (O & L 37). But to what extent parataxis and hypotaxis in written on spoken language indicate the thought patterns and the world view of actual human beings is not, I maintain, as certain a proposition as Ong presents it. Surface language results from a multiplicity of factors, not the least of which are the purpose of the discourse and personal motive. Furthermore, Ong extends his conclusions about the thought he finds in certain samples of language not only to entire cultures and historical periods but also, as in the "Literacy and Orality" article, to specific individuals.

A fourth assumption underlying Ong's version of the Great Leap theory of literacy also has to do with the nature of language. In Orality and Literacy, Ong says that at the end of the 19th century, when the shift from orality to literacy had been completed,

"Education could no longer be described as fundamentally rhetorical...The three Rs--reading 'riting, and 'rithmentic--representing an essentially nonrhetorical, bookish, commerical and domestic education gradually took over..."(O & L 116). To claim that education--including 'riting--can be "essentially nonrhetorical" is to claim that language can be non-rhetorical. Richard Weaver has argued for the rhetorical nature of all language; all language, Weaver says, is "sermonic." And Michael Halliday has demonstrated that almost every bit of language is multi-functional and that only one of its several functions is to convey information. Ong seems to see in language only two functions: It can be either informational (that is, nonrhetorical, or "literate") or regulatory (that is, rhetorical, or "oral"). To assume that language can be purely informational is to assume that language can be neutral.

Ong's assumption that neutrality is possible extends beyond language, however, as we see from his assertions about technology. For Ong, the alphabet is technology. Writing is technology. The list, an achievement of literacy, is neutral (O & L 42). The pen, the stylus, paper, printing presses, computers--all, according to Ong, are neutral technologies (O & L 81-82). But Ong's discussion of the technologies of literacy stops here, overlooking the fact that technologies do not arise out of nothingness. Technology, according to Raymond Williams, is never neutral, but is always, instead, the product of the society that invents it. Societies--and certain groups within societies--determine the uses and the users of particular technolgies. Applying Williams' analysis of televison to

literacy, Brian Street argues that like other technological advances, literacy "is a cultural form, a social product whose shape and influence depend upon prior political and ideological factors" (96). The social and political uses of the technologies of literacy are only rarely alluded to in Ong's discussion of writing as technology.

So far, I have discussed four assumptions of Ong's version of the Great Leap theory: Literacy-orality differences lie, first, in the physical world, that is, in physical stimuli, sound and sight, and, second, in the innate universal capacities and limits of the human mind. Third, language is a transparent medium through which we may, if we read properly, apprehend actual human thought processes. And, fourth, both language and other human productions can be neutral.

These assumptions locate knowledge in the physical and physiological and claim the possibility of neutrality for both human beings and their language. Thus, this epistemology presents the knower, the known, and the language that conveys the knowledge as separated from society. Indeed this is a recurring theme in Orality and Literacy--that literacy isolates human beings from one another (Tuman). The major effect of this epistemology is to deny that technology, literacy, language, and even thought itself are embedded in and constructed by social and political constraints and influences.

And so I arrive at the questions I wish to ask: Why in the mid to late 1970's was this theory of literacy attractive to a good many of us in composition? Why did some of us find compelling a theory

suggesting that knowlege is possible only through the achievement of neutrality, implying that differences among groups result from essential physical and neurological qualities more than from social and political differences, and claiming that a universal model of literacy not only exists but has been found?

Perhaps it is evident that I see the Great Leap mired in positivism. Why then were we attracted to such an epistemology at that particular historical moment? Extending Berlin's thesis, I suggest--and I really do mean "suggest," not "argue"--that this perspective on literacy and the world view it embodies, reflects, and teaches might have been part of the general retreat of American society from the difficult political and social questions raised during the 1960's. In a few minutes Kay will be discussing the expressive rhetorics of that period, but it does seem to me that those rhetorics asked the same questions and protested the same conditions that were being asked and protested on campuses and in the streets. Could it be that, though those questions were and still are legitimate, composition pedagogy, like the wider society, did not then possess a theoretical framework with which to deal with them? Did we, like the rest of the country, retreat from the excesses and the passions? Did we, like the rest of the country, retreat from difficult questions whose answers require examination of national and personal assumptions? Did the proponents of the Great Leap just retreat a little further than the rest of us?

These questions make me uncomfortable. But I feel they need to be asked.

At this conference you will hear many arguments from a different rhetoric, a different epistemology. You will hear that acts of literacy are social and political acts. You will hear that knowledge is a social construction. You will hear social theories used to re-interpret old research and to explicate the writing of everyone from basic writers to attorneys. Will these social perspectives allow us to take on the hard questions raised by the expressionistic rhetorics of the 60's, this time without retreating? I hope so. The work of scholars like Heath, Bartholomae, Brandt, Bruffee, Bizzell, and Berlin, to name only a few, leads me to believe that we now have the beginnings of a perspective that will allow us to grapple with--though not necessarily resolve--the social, political, and intellectual questions that confront us as we go about our main task--the teaching of literacy, writing, and rhetoric in a pluralistic society. For that, finally, is how we are judged and how we must judge ourselves.

CCCC
March, 1987

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